Improving the quality of teaching
Jacqui Rothery
Opinion piece
Improving the quality of teaching: Fright or Flight? Fear or Fun? Observation: what happens when you enter that classroom?

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Checklists don’t usually build trust; they grow in length and become unwieldy. As an additional inspector for Ofsted, I was frequently dismayed to find senior leaders proudly displaying long lists of the features or characteristics of teaching they were looking for in a lesson. Such lists were often based on the latest criteria for judging the quality of teaching, from the latest Ofsted schedule, chopped up into sentences or sections, with a neat column of tick boxes beside them. Middle leaders were trained in their use and thick files of tick lists on individual teachers collated to provide evidence of the quality of teaching across the school. Often, teachers dreaded the clipboard with the checklist and the arrival of Ofsted was the culmination of their terror.

Similarly, I have seen – and experienced- too much of the leader who is the expert, gathering troops of experts who are going to show how it’s done. As a headteacher, teaching drama (my subject was English), I was in constant fear of the head of department or the advanced skills teacher I had appointed strolling into my room and finding my teaching far from outstanding. Equally, I have never forgotten my experience as a deputy headteacher, teaching in my subject area, this time being observed by a panel of the teaching and learning group I had set up and watching with horror as one of the most challenging boys in the class climbed out of the window, declaring that it was Friday and he was going to put a bet on. Fortunately or not, the window was on the ground floor; I also learned a lot about what is or isn’t possible on Friday afternoons.

This leads to my next point: laughter – fun. Building trust is often about honesty, openness, daring to experiment, sharing the highs and lows and learning to enjoy both. I often used to take myself too seriously, thereby modelling to others that they should take things very seriously too. Moral purpose is serious business – but it can be fun too. Teachers come into teaching because they want to make a difference and they are often very creative, willing to take risks, willing to explore learning. They know that learning is usually enjoyed – even when it is difficult. Senior leaders can help them to teach well by creating a climate in which dialogue is encouraged and valued and teachers can learn from their failures as much as their successes. Senior leaders must create space for joy and delight; they must allow teachers to dare, to try out new ideas together and to have fun doing so – without fear of failure.

How can senior leaders help teachers to improve the quality of teaching through observing lessons? What skills do they need? What challenges might they face in different schools, across different subjects and in different contexts? How can senior leaders work with middle leaders to develop a culture in which lesson observation is regarded as an opportunity to learn and share practice rather than seen as a threat?
Senior leaders can also help by working with middle leaders to engage the whole school in thinking about great teaching and being explicit in describing it. Sometimes it is unpicking the language that is important. In a piece of professional development we ambitiously called creating the potentially outstanding lesson, staff at Holgate worked together in teams to define the outstanding lesson. As a start point, we examined the Ofsted criteria for good teaching and looked at differences in terminology between good and outstanding. What did that tell us about our lessons? When teams came up with phrases like wow factor, other teams challenged them to pin down what that meant. The language and the ideas started flowing; we explored what we meant by exciting content, inspirational, good relationships, good group work, cohesive planning, high quality feedback, enjoyment, independence and many other terms. Sharing ideas and thoughts together as a school was important. It is difficult to be consistent and to improve practice without whole school commitment and consensus. There were many stages in the staff moving on from this, but it led to members of departments volunteering to be filmed delivering a lesson that they had created together and thought to be potentially outstanding. The lesson would be observed by peers from other departments and discussed. If it all went wrong, there would be no blame, just laughter and delight in having tried.

This kind of whole school learning can only take place within a climate of trust. As a senior leader, it is important not just to facilitate this but to take part: put yourself on the line, take a few risks. It is also important that you establish absolute clarity about your role: be clear when you are enabling and participating; be equally clear when you are judging. Always use teachers’ own assessments and thoughts as your start point for evaluating and developing; teachers are professionals and usually they want to learn. Mostly, what they say about their own teaching will provide an accurate and honest basis for further discussion.

It is important to recognise that there are many different classrooms and lessons can be observed everywhere. Some of the best teaching I ever did (my subject by now was leadership) was coaching my shadow student head in how to lead meetings of the student council and in how to develop her student leaders into an effective team. Some of her most memorable learning was when she accompanied me to a meeting of secondary headteachers at the Department for Education in sanctuary buildings. Some of the best teaching I ever observed was the caretaker who had gained his GCSE mathematics working one to one with some very reluctant learners in a GCSE maths lesson.

Each interaction is a learning opportunity, from the child at the gates being greeted on arrival, to the students being supervised in the hall as they sit their GCSEs.

What goes on in your school? Do you look for good teaching everywhere? Do you actively acknowledge, record and celebrate it? Does your quality of teaching file reflect the rich diversity of the teaching experiences in your school? Is this shared?

I learned quickly as an inspector that for Ofsted judging the quality of teaching is not about using descriptors as checklists; it is not about collating grades. Rather, it is about the quality of teaching in the school as a whole and relies on professional judgement. It is about a school’s culture of open dialogue, its strong desire to improve, its infectious energy. It is the wonder and awe of exceptional learning that inspectors want to find. As a senior leader, it is your role to enable such a culture to flourish within your school and to model it in your practice. Within this, experts will be used and welcomed; effective coaching and mentoring will add value to the quality of teaching. This is not at odds with a standards agenda: as a leader, you must never lose sight of achievement nor shy away from giving hard messages when poor teaching leads to low outcomes. Ensure rigour through effective monitoring and recording, but involve all and don’t let the measuring of performance be an end in itself.

When you enter that classroom, do teachers want to show you how much their students can fly in their learning? Is it enjoyable to be there? Are you welcomed into their space or do they cower when they see you coming?
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